Atlantis Found in the Pacific

Hal Foster

The Wave Garden by Yusuke Obuchi is a 480-acre rectangle that floats, like a Suprematist square, off the coast of California. Made up of 1734 Piezoelectric sheets supported by 1734 buoys, it serves as an electrical generator during the week and a marine park on the weekend. In its first mode the sheets of the garden are bent by the sea waves in a way that generates electricity that is then transferred to the energy grid of the Golden State. In its second mode electricity is run through the sheets in a way that shapes them into a metamorphic island of coastal leisure and maritime play.

When the project was first presented for review at Princeton, it was discussed as potentially functional, just crazy enough to work. That purchase on the possible is important to its effects, for otherwise the Wave Garden could be dismissed as another architectural whim. But the conversation got stuck in the viability of the project, which was also crazy (even if Sun Ra became President, the project could not be realized: no way in hell). In short, the Wave Garden is not whimsical, yet neither is it practical; it is precisely utopian, and it is this dimension that renders it both liberatory and critical, as is true of all utopian proposals. For it forces us, if only for a moment, to think "why not?", and the force of this why-not is to open up and to critique, if only for a moment, what-is.

The project will evoke different precedents for different viewers. In its presentation this floating garden looks more like a hanging garden, its sheets aglow and its wires and weights brilliant with reflected light. This apparition first reminded me of the structural demonstrations that Gaudi made for his La Famílla Sagrada, with its model vaults also hung with tiny weights to test how much load they might withstand. Like Gaudi, Obuchi is both a rationalist and a visionary (they also share a fascination with tropes of wind and wave); both architects reconcile the Constructivist and the Surrealist lines in modernist form-making—Gaudi before this opposition quite existed, Obuchi in its apparent aftermath. (But are we ever done with these lines, or does the Constructivist-Surrealist dialectic only return in ever new guises?)

For most viewers the immediate parallels for the Wave Garden will be the Earthworks of the 1960s and '70s, but it sits uneasily in this genealogy. It might be reminiscent of another California dream, the Running Fence of Christo, but it is the Running Fence with brains that retain a social conscience. Richard Serra once remarked that Earthworks like Running Fence were just drawings at an environmental scale, but in a sense they are worse: they are expressionism (read narcissism) writ large as well. The Wave Garden is wondrously altruistic in comparison with such projects. It also does not partake of the fascination with entropy so evident in the Earthworks of Robert Smithson, a reflection on the down side of the boom economy of the 1960s. On the contrary, the Wave Garden works to generate energy rather than to submit to its doom-day dissipation. And yet it is also not as redemptive as it may first appear. Early on Robert Morris was sensitive to the ideological recuperation of the Earthwork idea—that despoilers of the environment might use Earthworks as so much fill-in or camouflage. This is a danger that the Wave Garden also skirts: it is pragmatic, not pastoral. Unlike many designers in the present, Obuchi does not seek to naturalize—to vitalize or to animate—his architecture. On the contrary, his project is continuous with the greater human project to acculturate nature, but it proposes a taming, not a perverting. And in the end it might only point to the impossibility of such taming, to the utter wildness of the "Pacific" Ocean, to the sheer

alterity of nature. For anyone who knows the sea at all knows that it would scatter this garden within a week, if not a day.

So what is the genre in play here? We might be tempted to say "science fiction", but such a reply might only admit our own distance from the utopian imagination. Grandiose projects call out for grandiose connections, so why not juxtapose the Wave Garden project with the Tatlin proposal for the Monument to the Third International (1919-20)? Projected to be far taller than the Eiffel Tower, the Monument was to emblematize the new Communist society on the march. A spiral within a spiral, with struts made of steel, it was to house the various agencies of the government set in glass geometries, which were to rotate at various speeds (once a day, a week, a month, a year). A dialectical machine, it was also a figure of dialectics, one which was to harness the new forces of industrial technology in productive tension with the old rhythms of the natural world. Like The Wave Garden, the Monument could never be built, but its utopian quality guarantees its critical force to this day. A little of the same force might be put into play by the Wave Garden. Of course Tatlin had the State behind him, while Obuchi has only the Storefront. But even utopias start small.

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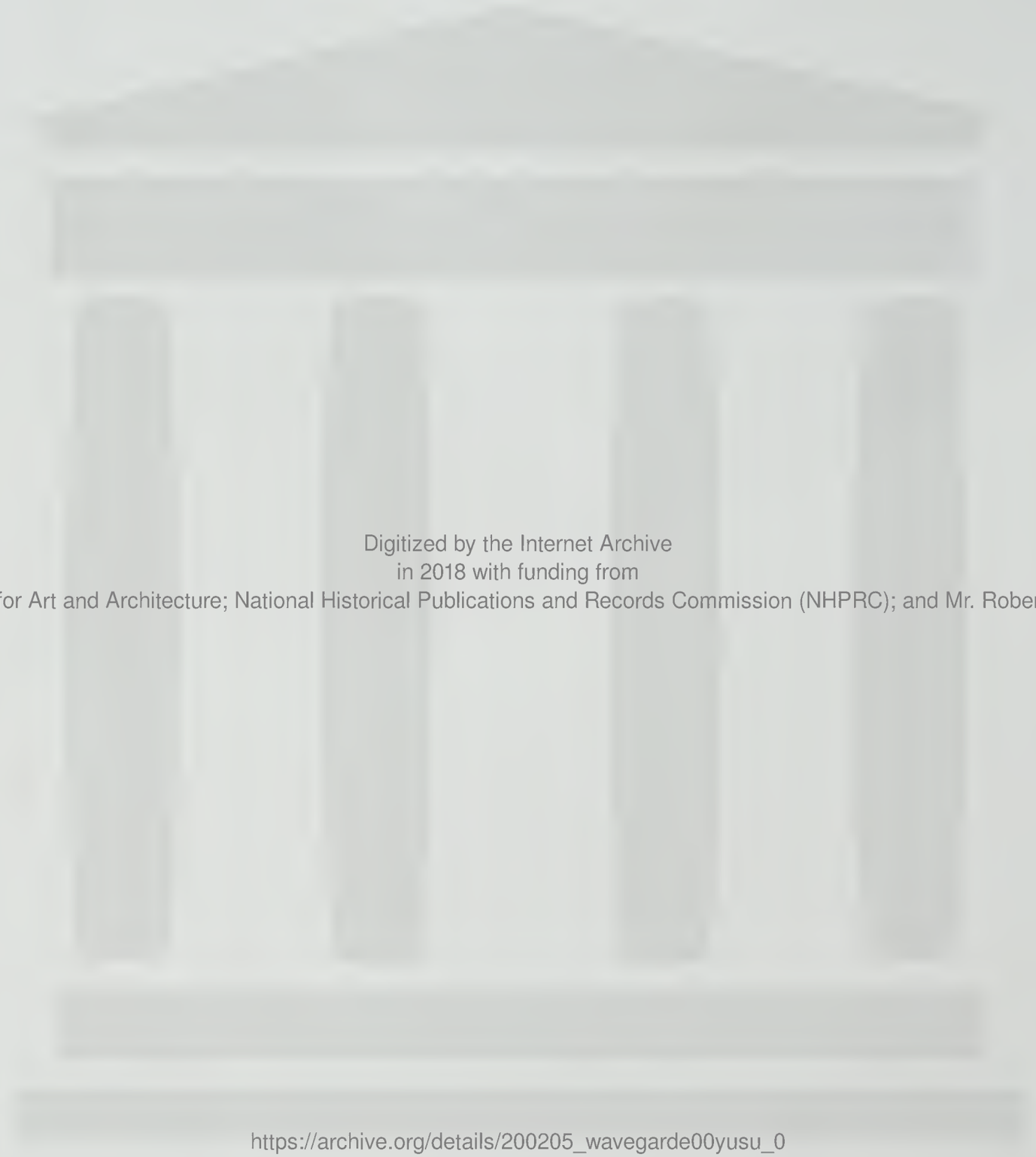

Architecture in a Dynamic Milieu

Jesse Reiser

It is perhaps no accident that Yusuke Obuchi, an itinerant expatriate since the age of sixteen, so clearly intuits the possibilities of change in a profession whose codes have traditionally valorized gravity, permanence and stasis.

His thesis The Wave Garden project, which I had the privilege to advise, is exemplary of an emerging tendency in Architecture which looks for new possibilities through the close tracking of material logics as they are released by dynamical systems. Simply put, he poses the question: what are the effects on our most commonly held architectural assumptions when its scales, orders and materials are traversed by energy fields?

His is a project that explores not-fixed schemas but organizations that can become a vehicle of continuous conversion, a material index of the First Law of Thermodynamics; that energy cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be converted into new forms.

There is a rigor and an assumption, within this direction of work and thought, that the scales, systems and materials of architecture must be intimately linked so as to register and transmit the widest range of change at all levels.

These are poised and exquisitely sensitive systems- systems, moreover, that while intellectually and aesthetically engaging by themselves present their most startling possibilities when properly aimed within the social and political context of building large scale public works. Issues of nature and culture, of energy, work and excess, domains until recently considered in dialectical opposition to one another, have come to be seen within the elastic model of ecology and thus demand an architecture that will communicate to this larger constellation as well.

In a real sense this project is a colossal mediator of environmental flows, delaying, transmitting and re-rout-

ing them for architecture on their way to entropy.
This is an architecture of dissipative systems which cascade through scales, orders and materials each with its own duration and effects. A deformation of ground thus is never merely a formal salience but part of a continuum of flow; here converting an acre sized parcel of artificial ground into a temporary hill of potential energy, there releasing potential through an energetic cascade into material scales.

Materials have also been re-evaluated, being chosen not solely for their traditional qualities but, as for example with the piezoelectric membrane which can convert mechanical energy into electrical, becomes a medium of transfer. Here it is worth noting that the origins of these materials as a product of the war machine do not become problematic as from a critical stand point, which tends to judge and interpret them by virtue of their origins or history. Rather, they are seen in their immediate capacity to produce effects and thus enter into the ethical domain of practice for what they can become rather than what they were.

Finally, I believe, it would be a mistake to consign this work to the melancholy history of utopian projects, or at least a utopian project that speaks to a yearning for a more perfect and purified future. The abstraction of the model speaks more to the machinic aspects of the project- the lack of specificity to the constraints of time in school. Indeed this project would welcome contamination as the paradigms that underlie it are inherently structured on difference rather than similarity.

This work above all is an experiment with the real, its engagement with abstract and material systems is not idealizing or autonomous- not a retreat from the world but like any fine instrument offer the most robust and open possibility to effect change within it.

May 2002

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